



Testimony

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National Cemetery System

Plans for Addressing Projected Increases in Veterans' Burials

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National Cemetery System: Plans for Addressing Projected Increases in Veterans' Burials

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss the National Cemetery System's (NCS) plans to accommodate the increasing demand for burial benefits. NCS of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides interment of eligible veterans and their families upon demand in national cemeteries. In fiscal year 1997, NCS provided burial benefits to about 73,000 veterans and their family members and had an appropriation of about \$77 million for interments and related program services.¹

With the aging of World War II veterans, the numbers of veteran deaths and interments performed by NCS continue to grow each year and are expected to peak between 2005 and 2010. NCS projects annual interments will increase over 40 percent between 1995 and 2010, peaking at about 107,000 in 2008. In addition, because of the depletion of available grave sites, over half of the national cemeteries currently are unable to accommodate casket burials of "first family members."² NCS projects that 15 additional cemeteries will deplete their inventory of casket grave sites for first family members by 2010. Therefore, it is important that NCS articulate how it will begin to position itself to handle this increase in demand for burial benefits.

My statement today will focus on NCS' plans for addressing the increasing demand for burial benefits and what it can do to extend the service period of existing cemeteries. The information in this statement is based on our September 1997 report on these topics, as well as recent discussions with NCS officials.³

In summary, NCS has adopted a 5-year strategic plan for fiscal years 1998 through 2003 with the goal of ensuring that burial in a national or state veterans' cemetery is an available option for all veterans and their eligible family members. Strategies outlined in NCS' plan include (1) building new national cemeteries, (2) expanding existing cemeteries, and (3) encouraging states to provide additional burial sites through

¹In addition to burying eligible veterans, NCS manages three related programs: Headstones and Markers; Presidential Memorial Certificates; and State Cemetery Grants, which provides financial aid to states establishing, expanding, or improving state veterans' cemeteries.

²Currently, veterans who choose casket burial are allotted one plot that can hold two caskets, one above the other. The first eligible family member who dies and is buried in such a plot, which may or may not be the veteran, is called the first family member; the second family member who dies and is buried in such a plot is called the subsequent family member.

³National Cemetery System: Opportunities to Expand Cemeteries' Capacities (GAO/HEHS-97-192, Sept. 10, 1997).

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participation in the State Cemetery Grants Program. However, it is unclear how NCS will address the veterans' burial demand during the peak years (2005 through 2010), when pressure on it will be greatest, since NCS' strategic plan does not indicate how it will begin to position itself to handle the increasing demand for burial benefits. NCS officials told us that beyond 2003, NCS will continue using the basic strategies contained in its current 5-year plan. For example, NCS plans to encourage states to establish veterans' cemeteries in areas where it does not plan to operate national cemeteries. However, since the grant program's inception in 1978, fewer than half of the states have established veterans' cemeteries. States have also shown limited interest in a legislative proposal designed to increase state participation by increasing the share of federal funding. Although we recommended in our September 1997 report that NCS address in its strategic plan veterans' long-term burial demand during the peak years, NCS officials contended that the strategic plan should cover only a 5-year period through 2003 to conform with VA's strategic planning process. Given the magnitude of the projected increase in demand for burial benefits, we continue to believe that it is important for NCS to articulate to the Congress and other stakeholders how it plans to address the increasing demand.

As annual interments increase, cemeteries reach their burial capacity, thus increasing the importance of making the most efficient use of available cemetery space. To identify feasible approaches to extending the service period of existing cemeteries, we analyzed the impact of adding burial sites to an acre of land in an existing cemetery.⁴ Our analysis of three interment options showed that columbaria offered the most efficient option because they would involve the lowest average interment cost and would significantly extend a cemetery's service period.⁵ Moreover, while the majority of veterans and eligible family members prefer a casket burial, cremation is an acceptable interment option for many, and the demand for cremation, which varies by region, continues to increase. NCS concurred with the recommendations in our September 1997 report to identify opportunities to construct columbaria in existing cemeteries and to collect and use information on veterans' burial preferences to better plan for future burial needs. NCS plans to collect such data in its next Survey of Veterans around the year 2000.

⁴We assumed an acre of land composed of parcels of land that are not contiguous.

⁵The three interment options analyzed were casket burial, in-ground interment of cremated remains, and interment of cremated remains in columbarium niches, which are recessed compartments within a structure—called a columbarium—that hold cremation urns.

Background

The National Cemeteries Act of 1973 (P.L. 93-43) authorized NCS to bury eligible veterans and their family members in national cemeteries. Before 1973, all national cemeteries were operated under the authority of the Department of the Army. However, P.L. 93-43 shifted authority to VA for all national cemeteries except Arlington National Cemetery and the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home National Cemetery.

NCS operates and maintains 115 national cemeteries located in 39 states and Puerto Rico. NCS offers veterans and their eligible family members the options of casket interment and interment of cremated remains in the ground (at most cemeteries) or in columbaria niches (at nine cemeteries). NCS determines the number and type of interment options available at each of its national cemeteries. The standard size of casket grave sites, the most common burial choice, is 5 feet by 10 feet, and the grave sites are prepared to accommodate two caskets stacked one on top of the other. A standard in-ground cremains site is 3 feet by 3 feet and can generally accommodate one or two urns. The standard columbarium niche used in national cemeteries is 10 inches wide, 15 inches high, and 20 inches deep. Niches are generally arrayed side by side, four units high, and can hold two or more urns, depending on urn size.

In addition to burying eligible veterans and their families, NCS manages the State Cemetery Grants Program, which provides aid to states in establishing, expanding, or improving state veterans' cemeteries. State veterans' cemeteries supplement the burial service provided by NCS. The cemeteries are operated and permanently maintained by the states. A State Cemetery grant may not exceed 50 percent of the total value of the land and the cost of improvements. The remaining amount must be contributed by the state. The State Cemetery Grants Program funded the establishment of 28 veterans' cemeteries, including 3 cemeteries currently under development, located in 21 states, Saipan, and Guam. The program has also provided grants to state veterans' cemeteries for expansion and improvement efforts.

NCS Has Strategic Plan for Addressing Burial Demand, but Plans Beyond 2003 Are Unclear

As the veteran population ages, NCS projects the demand for burial benefits to increase. NCS has a strategic plan for addressing the demand for veterans' burials up to fiscal year 2003, but the plan does not address longer term burial needs—that is, the demand for benefits during the expected peak years of veteran deaths, when pressure on the system will be greatest. Beyond the year 2003, NCS officials said they will continue using the basic strategies contained in the current 5-year plan.

Five-Year Plan Has Multiple Strategies

According to its 5-year strategic plan (1998-2003), one of NCS' primary goals is to ensure that burial in an open national or state veterans' cemetery is an available option for all eligible veterans and their family members. The plan sets forth three specific strategies for achieving this goal. First, NCS plans to build, when feasible, new national cemeteries. NCS is in various stages of establishing four new national cemeteries and projects that all will be operational by the year 2000.⁶

A second strategy for addressing the demand for veteran burials is through expansion of existing cemeteries. NCS plans to complete construction in order to make additional grave sites or columbaria available for burials at 24 national cemeteries. NCS also plans to acquire land needed for cemeteries to continue to provide service at 10 cemeteries.

Third, NCS plans to encourage states to provide additional grave sites for veterans through participation in the State Cemetery Grants Program. According to the plan, NCS plans to increase the number of veterans served by a state veterans' cemetery by 35,000 per year beginning in fiscal year 1998.⁷ Also, NCS is in the early stages of developing information designed to assist states in the establishment of a state veterans' cemetery.

Despite NCS plans to ensure that burial in a national or state veterans' cemetery is an available option, officials acknowledge that large numbers of veterans do not have access to a veterans' cemetery within a reasonable distance of their place of residence.⁸ For example, NCS estimated that of the approximately 26 million veterans in 1996, about 9 million (35 percent) did not have reasonable access to a national or state veterans' cemetery. According to NCS officials, the majority of areas not served were major metropolitan regions with a high concentration of veterans. With the completion of the four new cemeteries, NCS officials estimate that the percentage of veterans who will have reasonable access to a veterans' cemetery will increase from about 65 percent in fiscal year 1996 to about 80 percent in fiscal year 2003. However, NCS is unable to specify the extent to which veterans will have access to a national or state veterans' cemetery during the peak years. NCS' estimates of the percentage of

⁶New national cemeteries will be located in or near Albany, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; and Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas.

⁷In November 1997, New Hampshire opened a state veterans' cemetery that is expected to serve about 131,000 veterans.

⁸According to NCS, a national or state veterans' cemetery within 75 miles of a veteran's place of residence would provide reasonable access.

veterans who will have access to a veterans' cemetery stop at the year 2003.

**NCS Plans to Address
Burial Demand Beyond the
Year 2003 Are Unclear**

Although NCS has a 5-year strategic plan for addressing the demand for veterans' burials during fiscal years 1998 through 2003, plans to address the demand beyond 2003 are unclear. For example, NCS' strategic plan does not articulate how NCS will mitigate the effects of the increasing demand for burial services. According to NCS' Chief of Planning, although its strategic plan does not address long-term burial needs, NCS is always looking for opportunities to acquire land to extend the service period of national cemeteries. Also, to help address long-range issues, NCS compiles key information, such as mortality rates, number of projected interments and cemetery closures, locations most in need of veterans' cemeteries, and cemetery-specific burial layout plans.

In addition, NCS officials pointed out that the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (the Results Act) requires a strategic plan to cover a 5-year period.⁹ However, the Results Act requires that an agency prepare a strategic plan that covers at least a 5-year period and allows an agency to articulate how it plans to address future goals. For example, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's plan articulates a "strategic roadmap" that outlines agencywide goals. This roadmap lists separate goals for near-, mid-, and long-term time periods over the next 25 years and beyond. The Environmental Protection Agency's plan also articulates goals that are not bound by the 5-year time period. For example, it includes an objective to reduce toxic air emissions by 75 percent in 2010 from 1993 levels. Although NCS projects annual interments to increase about 42 percent from 73,000 in 1995 to 104,000 in 2010, peaking at 107,000 in 2008, its strategic plan does not indicate how the agency will begin to position itself to handle this increase in demand for burial benefits. We believe that, given the magnitude of the projected increase in demand for burial benefits, NCS' strategic plan should discuss how its current strategies will be adjusted to address the demand during the peak years of veterans' deaths.

While NCS' strategic plan does not address veterans' burial demand beyond the year 2003, NCS officials said they will continue using the basic strategies contained in the current 5-year plan. For example, NCS plans to enhance its relationship with states to establish state veterans' cemeteries

⁹The Results Act requires agencies to clearly define their missions, set goals, measure performance, and report on their accomplishments.

through the State Cemetery Grants Program. According to NCS' Chief of Planning, NCS will encourage states to locate cemeteries in areas where it does not plan to operate and maintain national cemeteries. Since the State Cemetery Grants Program's inception in 1978, fewer than half of the states have established veterans' cemeteries, primarily because, according to NCS officials, states must provide up to half of the funds needed to establish, expand, or improve a cemetery as well as pay for all equipment and annual operating costs.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Director of the State Cemetery Grants Program told us that few states, especially those with large veteran populations, have shown interest in legislation that VA proposed in its 1998 and 1999 budget submission in order to increase state participation. This proposed legislation would increase the federal share of construction costs from 50 to 100 percent and permit federal funding for up to 100 percent of initial equipment costs. In fact, according to the Director, state veterans' affairs officials said they would rather have funding for operating costs than for construction.

NCS officials told us they will continue to evaluate locations for additional national cemeteries in the future, based on demographic needs. However, according to NCS officials, VA currently has no plans to request construction funds for more than the four new cemeteries, which will be completed by the year 2000. Officials said that even with the new cemeteries, interment in a national or state veterans' cemetery will not be "readily accessible" to all eligible veterans and their family members. According to NCS officials, the majority of areas not served will be major metropolitan areas with high concentrations of veterans, such as Atlanta, Georgia; Detroit, Michigan; and Miami, Florida.

Columbarium Option Offers Opportunity for Extending Service Period of Existing Cemeteries

As existing national cemeteries reach their capacity, columbarium interment offers the most efficient option for extending cemetery service periods. We developed a model to analyze the cost of three interment options on the basis of the cost of developing a total of 1 acre of land, composed of noncontiguous parcels of land, in a cemetery nearing its limit of available casket grave sites.¹¹ The analysis showed that the average burial cost would be lowest using columbarium interment. For example,

¹⁰NCS officials told us the costs of state veterans' cemeteries range from about \$125,000 to over \$11 million, depending on size and location. NCS could not provide an estimate of the range of operating costs of state veterans' cemeteries.

¹¹We calculated the average cost per burial in present value terms. "Present value" is defined as the current worth of money expected to be spent at a future date. See app. I of our report entitled National Cemetery System: Opportunities to Expand Cemeteries' Capacities (GAO/HEHS-97-192, Sept. 10, 1997) for a detailed discussion of the methodology and data used in the cost analysis.

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the average columbarium interment cost would be about \$280, compared with about \$345 for in-ground cremains burial and about \$655 for casket burial. Our analysis also showed that the service delivery period would be extended the most using columbarium interment. For example, using columbarium interment in a total of 1 acre of land could extend the service delivery period by about 50 years, while in-ground cremains interment would extend the service period about 3 years and casket burials about half a year.¹²

While historical data imply that the majority of veterans and eligible dependents prefer a casket burial, NCS national data show that the demand for cremation at national cemeteries is increasing.¹³ For example, veterans choosing cremation increased about 50 percent between 1990 and 1996, and NCS officials expect demand for cremation to continue to increase in the future.¹⁴ The incidence of cremation also continues to increase in the general population. The Cremation Association of North America projects that cremation will account for about 40 percent of all burials by 2010.

Conclusion

Long-range planning is crucial to addressing veterans' burial needs during the peak years and beyond. Although NCS projects annual interments will increase over 40 percent between 1995 and 2010, NCS' current strategic plan does not indicate how it will begin to position itself to handle this increase in demand for burial benefits. Given the magnitude of this projected change, we continue to believe that NCS' plan should articulate how its strategies, goals, and objectives will address veterans' burial needs during the peak years, when the demand for burial benefits will be greatest. While the veteran population is entering its peak years of need, many national cemeteries are depleting their inventory of available grave sites. As a result, additional burial sites are needed to help meet future burial demand. In some cases, state veterans' cemeteries could reduce the negative impact of the loss of burial spaces from a national cemetery. However, fewer than half of the states have established veterans' cemeteries, and states have shown limited interest in a legislative proposal

¹²NCS concurred with the recommendation in our September 1997 report to identify opportunities to construct columbaria in existing cemeteries for the purpose of increasing burial capacity and extending the cemeteries' service periods.

¹³NCS concurred with the recommendation in our September 1997 report that additional data on veterans' preferences would assist them in developing plans to provide burial options. NCS officials told us they plan to include questions pertaining to personal burial preferences in NCS' next Survey of Veterans, which is planned around the year 2000.

¹⁴According to NCS officials, this percentage may be inflated because some cemeteries offer only cremation interments.

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designed to increase state participation by increasing the share of federal funding. Therefore, NCS needs to rely more on extending the service periods of its existing cemeteries. Columbaria can more efficiently utilize available cemetery land at a lower average interment cost than the other interment options and can also extend the service period of existing national cemeteries. Using columbaria also adds to veterans' choice of services and recognizes current burial trends. While we recognize that cremation may not be the preferred interment option for many veterans, identifying veterans' burial preferences, as NCS plans to do, would enable it to better manage limited cemetery resources and more efficiently meet veterans' burial needs.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I will be glad to answer any questions you or Members of the Subcommittee may have.

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